Unlocking the Treasury: Elementary Learning for Boys in Qing China. By Katherine Ngo. Ann Arbor, MI: Lever Press, 2025. Pp. 291. $23.99.

The present hyper-digital era and the burgeoning intelligence of the digital natives are overwhelming educators. Pedagogies are yet to keep up with technology, literacies now grow from within large language models, and definitions of academic honesty become shifting sands, with the world sashaying into the age of forgetfulness, of retrieval, but not of remembering. As in similar moments throughout history, educators turn to traditional wisdom for new insights. Memorization—once reduced to mechanical rote—is being reimagined as a complex, embodied route to deep learning.[1] Direct instruction—a highly structured and teacher-led approach theorized in the 1960s—is reintroduced to schools under the banner of explicit teaching, signalling a turn away from decades of inquiry-based, student-centred paradigm, with notable effects for very young learners.[2] In this context, Katherine Ngo's monograph *Unlocking the Treasury*:

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[1] This turn is traceable to discussions in the early 2010s across disciplines ranging from language, religion to music. See, for a typical example, Tan Po Li, "Towards a Culturally Sensitive and Deeper Understanding of 'Rote Learning' and Memorisation of Adult Learners," *Journal of Studies in International Education* 15.20 (2011): 124–45; and Glenn Hardaker and Aishah Sabki, "The Nature of Memorisation for Embodiment," *Journal for Multicultural Education* 10.1 (2016): 87–98; and Jennifer Mishra, "A Century of Memorization Pedagogy," *Journal of Historical Research in Music Education* 32.1 (2010): 3–18. In a more general reflection on school curriculums in Japan and Korea, Park Hyunjoon disassociates memorization with the suppression of creativity. See Park Hyunjoon, *Re-evaluating Education in Japan and Korea: Demystifying Stereotypes* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2013).

[2] For the most recent positive reintroduction to direct instruction and its integrability to contemporary pedagogy across disciplines, see Ton de Jong, Ard W. Lazonder, Clark A. Chinn, Frank Fischer, Janice Gobert, Cindy E. Hmelo-Silver, Ken R. Koedinger, Joseph S. Krajcik, Eleni A. Kyza, Marcia C. Linn, Margus Pedaste, Katharina Scheiter, and Zacharias C. Zacharia, "Let's Talk Evidence—The Case for Combining Inquiry-Based and Direct Instruction," *Educational Research Review* 39, P.100536, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.edurev.2023.100536. For its application on childhood education, see Jingjing Sun, Richard C. Anderson, Tzu-Jung Lin, Joshua A. Morris, Brian W. Miller, Shufeng Ma, Kim Thi Nguyen-Jahiel, and Theresa Scott, "Children's Engagement during Collaborative Learning and Direct Instruction through the Lens of Participant Structure," *Contemporary Educational Psychology* 69, Article 102061, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cedpsych.2022.102061; and Su Jiahong, Yang Weipeng, Yim Iris Heung Yue, Li Hui, and Hu Xiao, "Early Artificial Intelligence Education: Effects of Cooperative Play and Direct Instruction on Kindergarteners' Computational Thinking, Sequencing, Self-Regulation and Theory of Mind Skills," *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning* 40.6 (2024): 2917–25.

Elementary Learning for Boys in Qing China is very timely. A solid study in its own right, *Unlocking the Treasury* can also be read as a rediscovery of the beauty of close reading and the wonder of memory in learning.

With well-paced prose and conscientious treatment of a reservoir of classical Chinese-language passages that resist one-to-one English translation, Ngo offers a layered reconstruction of how the primer *Youxue qionglin* 幼學瓊林 (*Treasury of elementary learning*; hereafter the *Treasury*) came into shape through the work of both celebrated and obscure compilers, how it reached pupils in family- and community-based schools, how the changes in its content and consumption tracked enduring debates within Confucian thought, and, crucially, how the cultivation of the self and the mind—a experience as profound as the turning of jadeite into jewellery—has long stood at the centre of Chinese philosophy.

In a constant dialogue with important views and impenetrable mysteries in classical Chinese philology, philosophy, the history of education, and print culture, Ngo engaged a wide range of sources surrounding the *Treasury* in a pleasantly accessible structure. Her introduction traces the earliest textualized discussions of elementary learning for children to the second century B.C.E., and curated references to children's first readings across various genres and records of leading officials and thinkers from the pre-Qin through the Qing. The bibliographical sketch foregrounds children's learning as a domain that demands care and selectivity in traditional Chinese thought, effectively contextualizing the book at hand, whose title literally signals a "gathering of treasures" to nurture the young. Ngo then offers a meticulous recovery of the prototype, emergence, and transformation of the *Treasury* in the Ming-Qing period, while also using diverse methods to reveal its reception among educators and pupils as late as the Republican era. James Stewart Lockhart's 1893 English translation, printed in Hong Kong, is a particularly valuable find, which offers a strong testimony to the fact that the book was "generally known and widely used throughout the whole of China" (p. 17, note 83).[3] The removal of annotations and disregard of the Chinese syntactical features in Lockhart's rendition, however, was considered a near deficiency (p. 77), and perhaps inspired Ngo to produce her own translation of selected passages, which formed the centrepiece of her analysis in the main discussion.

In the main chapters, Ngo accentuates various cultural fabrics underlying the emergence and legacy of the *Treasury* in the long Qing period. Chapter 1 outlines the dominant intellectual trends and their associated educational philosophy rooted in neo-Confucianism. Three main schools of thought, namely the school of principle (*lixue* 理學), the school of heart-mind (*xinxue* 心學) and the school of practical, evidential learning (*shixue* 實學), contributed to what Ngo described as an "eclectic" constellation

[3] Cited from J. H. Stewart Lockhart, *A Manual of Chinese Quotations* (Hong Kong: Kelly and Walsh, 1893), p. ii.

of the Qing educational mind-map. This overview is not an astounding surprise but definitely a rigorous recovery of competing editions and annotations that deserve scholarly attention. Furthermore, Ngo argues with confidence and clarity that beneath Qing's philosophical symphony lies a consistent emphasis on *lixue*, with the Cheng-Zhu school as its orthodox vis-à-vis other rivalling thoughts.

Ngo's opening analysis compellingly argues that Qing elementary education was far more dynamic than any stereotype of rigid, monolithic indoctrination suggests. By this point, Ngo's text-based method has strongly manifested. To steer her description to the actual scene of learning, Ngo bridged close reading of the text and macro-mapping of the educators and children by drawing on "interpretive communities" (pp. 29–30), a classical concept in literary reader-response criticism which gained currency in the 1980s and 1990s. Ngo is clear-minded in noting that the concept is not applied to identify a tangible, quantifiable group of the Qing population, but to contour a knowledgeable network comprising primarily authors, publishers, teachers, and secondarily students and pupils, who shared an inherited set of norms and conventions governing the exercise, the ritual, and the mission of reading (p. 30).

Without too much terminological entanglement, Ngo presents a slim yet flexible theoretical framework that effectively supports her extensive text analysis across three main chapters. Each chapter explores a unique set of interpretive strategies recoverable from the webs of meanings—in Ngo's language, designative and lexicographical "micro-structures" (pp. 91 and 95)—emerging from the main text and marginalia in various annotated editions of the *Treasury* circulated in Qing. Ngo's exemplary close reading integrates a thorough exegesis of Chinese segments with her original English paraphrases of selected chapters, highlighting the intertwining of moral education and foundational literacy. She further examines ethical themes in the annotations, revealing a legacy of practical statecraft learning that resonates in the subsequent chapters, where she discusses the *Treasury*'s role in cultivating boys into morally apt and academically proficient statesmen.

The challenge of recovering the pedagogical and philosophical agenda associated with the *Treasury* is met with applaudable intellectual rigour. Chapter 3 offers insightful discussions on the deployment of literary allusions to cultivate internal correctness and righteousness, suggesting a child-centred pedagogical approach linked to the ideals of Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529). This perspective enhances our understanding of children's education within the context of Qing heterogenous academic traditions. Chapter 4 underscores the pragmatic role of the *Treasury* in shaping children's character and language competence for the socio-political screening of talents in Qing China, particularly through the multi-level training for *keju* 科舉 civil examination system which had penetrated private studios in households and local communities. With the multi-pronged analyses, Ngo convincingly concludes that the connection between childhood reading and adult temperament is fundamentally rooted in the formative influence of the very exercise of memorization. In her recovery

of the historical learning scenes, memorization was woven so seamlessly with the intended interpretation of the *Treasury* that it created complex embodied experience and lifelong impression. She posits that memorization was a primary mode through which children engaged with key texts during this period, cultivating a long-term collective memory derived from intensive interaction with the core lexicon, syntax, and commentary (both written and oral), which coherently shaped the Han Chinese intellectual and political milieu.

This panoramic study, emerging from a rich pedagogical tradition, is further enhanced by Ngo's relentless self-reflexivity regarding the engagement with the significant micro-structures of her own contemporary context. Ngo adeptly acknowledges that her argumentation is grounded in terminology and theories from modern Western scholarship across disciplines such as Sinology, comparative philosophy, literary criticism, and educational studies. Rather than imposing Western frameworks onto Chinese data, Ngo mobilizes these theories as heuristic tools to elucidate the learning processes interwoven with her materials. Ngo is frank about her concerns regarding anachronistic assessments (p. 28) and aptly deploys modal verbs to indicate speculative statements throughout her reimagination of the historical interpretation and consumption.

The general transparency of the work would benefit academic readers more, if Ngo would provide a guiding statement outlining her approach to translating selected Chinese passages into English. This clarification would help mitigate potential risks of unsystematic paraphrasing and over-domestication when integrating multilingual sources within a predominant language. While the bilingual text presentation enhances the monograph's design and accessibility, additional clarity in the cross-language treatment could further enrich the credibility of the scholarship. Nonetheless, in its current shape, the monograph offers not only an in-depth analysis of the *Treasury* but also a reliable record of the process of how a researcher navigates multilingual sources, between the intangible past and the stark present, back and forth, reaching the gems of humanity.

Finally, Ngo's aspirations for future research directions are noteworthy. Ngo's careful management of her research scope and reader expectations in the introductory chapter hints toward potential trajectories. The rationale behind the exclusion of girls and non-Han boys raised in the "imperial court and household" (pp. 30–31) is well-justified, given the limited sources on these groups in relation to the *Treasury*. While some readers may seek a more gendered or nuanced exploration of the experiences of multi-ethnic, multilingual youth in Manchurian China, Ngo does not purport to provide immediate answers but instead offers valuable theoretical models and leads for further inquiry. In her conclusion, she ambitiously introduces transcultural perspectives and comparative philosophical approaches, suggesting avenues for future research.

To the wider contemporary audience beyond academia, *Unlocking the Treasury* has significant potential to renew existing knowledge of the history of education in China and to counter the stereotypical impression of traditional Chinese, or even Asian, pedagogy. The monograph will shift amateur historians' focus from the elite, advanced learning to the formative years of childhood, revealing sophistication in early childhood education in China, a highly relatable but long under-represented dimension to the history of education. While the application of modern Western educational theories to Qing China is experimental, it provides fresh and accessible vocabulary for discussing how traditional Chinese pedagogy functioned cognitively in history, and how it should be revisited and perhaps reapplied more widely, for recalling our common legacy, for renewing our belief in human-to-human nurturing, and for reconfiguring the structural power of remembering. To preserve classics and their wisdom, and to counter the present-day loss and lust that result from the unprecedented post–human intelligent age, *Unlocking the Treasury* offers a strong scholarly take with its genuine, essential recovery of the philosophical, historical, literary, and psychological dimensions of education for boys in Qing China. The book's open access is a gift to all.

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